

Use of Foreign Contractors Called into Question

Author: [Amanullah Nasrat](#)

The recent collapse of a hospital being renovated by a Chinese company raises questions about the competency of foreign firms being hired.

Afghan contractors and construction workers have become increasingly concerned that their government is awarding more and more big construction contracts to foreign firms instead of local ones - and that these companies are bringing foreign workers here to do the jobs that Afghans could be doing.

Foreign contractors and Afghan government officials counter by saying that Afghan contractors don't have the experience, the financial resources or the equipment to win many of the tenders.

The sudden collapse of the western part of Kabul's state-run Jamhoriyat hospital on July 26, which was being renovated by the Chinese company, Complant, has heightened concern about the numerous construction projects in the country. At least six Afghans were killed in the collapse and more than 30 others were injured, including 2 Chinese workers. At least 30 people are still reported missing.

Dr Ferozuddin, deputy health minister, called the accident a "technical mistake" but didn't immediately blame anyone.

A team made up of representatives from the ministry of health and the interior ministry is investigating the cause of the accident.

Abdul Karim Safi is an investment manager with the Afghan Investment Support Agency, a government agency within the ministry of commerce that handles the promotion and licensing of all new foreign and domestic investment in Afghanistan. During an interview before the collapse took place, he said that foreign companies are not required to present proof of the quality of their work when they apply for a license to work in the country.

"They come to Afghanistan. If they have a passport, and pay taxes, we give them permission," he said. "It's not up to us that their works have quality or not."

Sayed Mahmood Dad Manish, head of the Kabul-based Quyash construction company, said that Afghan firms are just as capable as foreign companies in performing construction projects.

"Awarding projects to foreigners means that the government trusts the foreigners more than Afghans," he said. He also accused foreign companies of being inefficient, claiming that, "If the billion dollars [given by] the international community were given to Afghans, Afghanistan would be reconstructed."

During an interview last month, LI Maqoqing, the head of the Jamhoriyat renovation project for Complant, expressed his doubts about the ability of Afghan companies to undertake such a job.

"Afghans contractors can't contract these kind of projects. They don't have modern equipment, the experience, and ... don't have the budgets for new projects," Maqoqing said.

When asked by IWPR, officials with the ministry of health, ministry of public works, ministry of planning and the ministry of education said they could not provide information on how many construction contracts had been awarded to foreign firms and how many had been given to Afghan companies.

When asked about the bidding process and specific details about the Jamhoriyat hospital project, officials at the ministry of health's construction department referred IWPR to the foreign-relations department, which in turn referred the reporter back to the construction department.

Eventually, D Suhaila Sediq, the minister of health, told IWPR, "We don't do interviews with international organisations". She also ordered a construction department official to seize the reporter's accreditation letter.

Mohammed Yaqub Shaghasi, the deputy minister of the ministry of public works, said that his ministry was interested in awarding construction projects to Afghan firms, but that regulations established by the Afghan Investment Support Agency, the World Bank, and other donors often prevent this from happening.

"The national companies have problems," he said. "They don't have experience and perhaps they don't have guaranteed cash in the banks."

Safi, with the Afghan Investment Support Agency, said also that there are some big projects that Afghan contractors are not able to run because they don't have modern equipment.

But Amanullah Mahmoodzada, the head of Mahmoodzad Construction Company, doesn't accept these explanations.

"When we negotiate about a [government] contract, we are asked to give a bribe and if someone gives a bribe, no one will ask about his experience," he said.

Meanwhile, Afghan labourers also feel that they are losing out to foreign workers.

In a commercial district in central Kabul, where carpets, televisions, videos and other goods are sold, hundreds of day labourers wait on the corner - hoping to be picked up for construction and reconstruction projects.

Akhter Mohammed, 29, waited on the street with his work clothes in his bag on a recent morning. He said that he could only find work three days a week for which he is paid 3 US dollars, or about 150 aghanis.

He blamed foreign workers for his joblessness. "If the foreign workers didn't come to Afghanistan, I would be hired every day and my wage would also increase," he said.

Mohammed Ayub, 42, a mason from Kabul, also blamed foreigners for costing Afghans jobs. "We want the Afghanistan government to prevent foreign workers coming to Afghanistan, so that we can take part in construction of our country ourselves," he said.

Shaghasi, the deputy minister of public works, acknowledged that foreign firms are often reluctant to hire Afghan labourers. "Because of the security concerns they don't trust Afghan workers to be with them in the

camps," he said. "They just trust their own workers."

Even when Afghan labourers do find employment with foreign firms, they are often paid less than their foreign counterparts.

In the case of the hospital renovation, for example, Maqqing of Complant said that it employed between 120 and 160 Afghan labourers, 15 Chinese engineers and 25 Chinese labourers on the project. However, the Chinese labourers are earning between 300-400 dollars a month, compared to between 100 and 120 dollars for Afghan workers.

"We pay the Chinese workers more than the Afghans because they came here and stay here 24 hours a day," Maqqing explained

Karizma, a Turkish construction company, is building a new private commercial building going up in central Kabul. This company has 4 Turkish engineers, 45 Turkish workers and 65 Afghan workers, said Ekrem Gurboiz, the company's representative in Kabul,

Gurboiz said the Turkish labourer wage on the project is 800 dollars per month compared to the Afghan one of between 150 and 300 dollars. Turkish engineers make about 1500 a month, compared to 700 dollars for Afghan engineers.

Gurboiz cited the differences in the standard of livings in various countries for the disparity in wages.

"A German engineer may ask 5000 dollars and an American engineer may ask 10,000 dollars," Gurboiz said. "After five years none of the foreign companies will be able to win the contracts from Afghans, because [Afghans] will work more efficiently and compassionately than foreigners."

Amanullah Nasrat and Jawad Sharifzadza are IWPR staff reporters in Kabul. Wahidullah Amani, an IWPR staff writer, and freelance reporter Mohammed Karim Rasuli also contributed to this report.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

Focus: [Afghanistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/use-foreign-contractors-called-question>